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Lady Mason after her Confession.



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CHAPTER V.

SHOWING HOW MRS. ORME COULD BE VERY WEAK MINDED.

I VENTURE to think, I may almost say to hope, that Lady Mason's confession at the end of the last chapter will not have taken anybody by surprise. If such surprise be felt I must have told my tale badly. I do not like such revulsions of feeling with regard to my characters as surprises of this nature must generate. That Lady Mason had committed the terrible deed for which she was about to be tried, that Mr. Furnival's suspicion of her guilt was only too well founded, that Mr. Dockwrath with his wicked ingenuity had discovered no more than the truth, will, in its open revelation, have caused no surprise to the reader;—but it did cause terrible surprise to Sir Peregrine Orme.

And now we must go back a little and endeavour to explain how it was that Lady Mason had made this avowal of her guilt. That she had not intended to do so when she entered Sir Peregrine's library is very certain. Had such been her purpose she would not have asked Mrs. Orme to visit her at Orley Farm. Had such a course of events been in her mind she would not have spoken of her departure from The Cleeve as doubtful. No. She had intended still to keep her terrible secret to herself; still to have leaned upon Sir Peregrine's arm as on the arm of a trusting friend. But he had overcome her by his generosity; and in her fixed resolve that he should not be dragged down into this abyss of misery the sudden determination to tell the truth at least to him had come upon her. She did tell him all; and then, as soon as the words were out of her mouth, the strength which had enabled her to do so deserted her, and she fell at his feet overcome by weakness of body as well as spirit.

But the words which she spoke did not at first convey to his mind their full meaning. Though she had twice repeated the assertion that she was guilty, the fact of her guilt did not come home to his understanding as a thing that he could credit. There was something, he doubted not, to surprise and harass him,—something which when revealed and made clear might, or might not, affect his purpose of marrying,—something which it behoved this woman to tell before she could honestly become his wife,

something which was destined to give his heart a blow. But he was very far as yet from understanding the whole truth. Let us think of those we love best, and ask ourselves how much it would take to convince us of their guilt in such a matter. That thrusting of the lie down the throat of Joseph Mason had become to him so earnest a duty, that the task of believing the lie to be on the other side was no easy one. The blow which he had to suffer was a cruel blow. Lady Mason, however, was merciful, for she might have enhanced the cruelty tenfold.

He stood there wondering and bewildered for some minutes of time, while she, with her face hidden, still clung round his knees. 'What is it?' at last he said. 'I do not understand.' But she had no answer to make to him. Her great resolve had been quickly made and quickly carried out, but now the reaction left her powerless. He stooped down to raise her; but when he moved she fell prone upon the ground; he could hear her sobs as though her bosom would burst with them.

And then by degrees the meaning of her words began to break upon him. 'I am guilty of all this with which they charge me.' Could that be possible? Could it be that she had forged that will; that with base, premeditated contrivance she had stolen that property; stolen it and kept it from that day to this;—through all these long years? And then he thought of her pure life, of her womanly, dignified repose, of her devotion to her son,—such devotion indeed!—of her sweet pale face and soft voice! He thought of all this, and of his own love and friendship for her,—of Edith's love for her! He thought of it all, and he could not believe that she was guilty. There was some other fault, some much lesser fault than that, with which she charged herself. But there she lay at his feet, and it was necessary that he should do something towards lifting her to a seat.

He stooped and took her by the hand, but his feeble strength was not sufficient to raise her. 'Lady Mason,' he said, 'speak to me. I do not understand you. Will you not let me seat you on the sofa?'

But she, at least, had realized the full force of the revelation she had made, and lay there covered with shame, broken-hearted, and unable to raise her eyes from the ground. With what inward struggles she had played her part during the last few months, no one might ever know! But those struggles had been kept to herself. The world, her world, that world for which she had cared, in which she had lived, had treated her with honour and respect, and had looked upon her as an ill-used innocent woman. But now all that would be over. Every one now must know what she was. And then, as she lay there, that thought came to her. Must every one know it? Was there no longer any hope for her? Must Lucius

be told? She could bear all the rest, if only he might be ignorant of his mother's disgrace;—he, for whom all had been done! But no. He, and every one must know it. Oh! if the beneficent Spirit that sees all and pities all would but take her that moment from the world!

When Sir Peregrine asked her whether he should seat her on the sofa, she slowly picked herself up, and with her head still crouching towards the ground, placed herself where she before had been sitting. He had been afraid that she would have fainted, but she was not one of those women whose nature easily admits of such relief as that. Though she was always pale in colour and frail looking, there was within her a great power of self-sustenance. She was a woman who with a good cause might have dared anything. With the worst cause that a woman could well have, she had dared and endured very much. She did not faint, nor gasp as though she were choking, nor become hysteric in her agony; but she lay there, huddled up in the corner of the sofa, with her face hidden, and all those feminine graces forgotten which had long stood her in truth so royally. The inner, true, living woman was there at last,—that and nothing else.

But he,—what was he to do? It went against his heart to harass her at that moment; but then it was essential that he should know the truth. The truth, or a suspicion of the truth was now breaking upon him; and if that suspicion should be confirmed, what was he to do? It was at any rate necessary that everything should be put beyond a doubt.

‘Lady Mason,’ he said, ‘if you are able to speak to me——’

‘Yes,’ she said, gradually straightening herself, and raising her head though she did not look at him. ‘Yes. I am able.’ But there was something terrible in the sound of her voice. It was such a sound of agony that he felt himself unable to persist.

‘If you wish it I will leave you, and come back,—say in an hour.’

‘No, no; do not leave me.’ And her whole body was shaken with a tremour, as though of an ague fit. ‘Do not go away, and I will tell you everything. I did it.’

‘Did what?’

‘I—forged the will. I did it all.—I am guilty.’

There was the whole truth now, declared openly and in the most simple words, and there was no longer any possibility that he should doubt. It was very terrible,—a terrible tragedy. But to him at this present moment the part most frightful was his and her present position. What should he do for her? How should he counsel her? In what way so act that he might best assist her without compromising that high sense of right and wrong which in him was a second nature. He felt at the moment that he would

still give his last shilling to rescue her,—only that there was the property! Let the heavens fall, justice must be done there. Even a wretch such as Joseph Mason must have that which was clearly his own.

As she spoke those last words, she had risen from the sofa, and was now standing before him resting with her hands upon the table, like a prisoner in the dock.

‘What!’ he said; ‘with your own hands?’

‘Yes; with my own hands. When he would not do justice to my baby, when he talked of that other being the head of his house, I did it, with my own hands,—during the night.’

‘And you wrote the names,—yourself?’

‘Yes; I wrote them all.’ And then there was again silence in the room; but she still stood, leaning on the table, waiting for him to speak her doom.

He turned away from the spot in which he had confronted her and walked to the window. What was he to do? How was he to help her? And how was he to be rid of her? How was he to save his daughter from further contact with a woman such as this? And how was he to bid his daughter behave to this woman as one woman should behave to another in her misery? Then too he had learned to love her himself,—had yearned to call her his own; and though this in truth was a minor sorrow, it was one which at the moment added bitterness to the others. But there she stood, still waiting her doom, and it was necessary that that doom should be spoken by him.

‘If this can really be true——’

‘It is true. You do not think that a woman would falsely tell such a tale as that against herself!’

‘Then I fear—that this must be over between you and me.’

There was a relief to her, a sort of relief, in those words. The doom as so far spoken was so much a matter of course that it conveyed no penalty. Her story had been told in order that that result might be attained with certainty. There was almost a tone of scorn in her voice as she said, ‘Oh yes; all that must be over.’

‘And what next would you have me do?’ he asked.

‘I have nothing to request,’ she said. ‘If you must tell it to all the world, do so.’

‘Tell it; no. It will not be my business to be an informer.’

‘But you must tell it. There is Mrs. Orme.’

‘Yes: to Edith!’

‘And I must leave the house. Oh, where shall I go when he knows it? And where will he go?’ Wretched miserable woman, but yet so worthy of pity! What a terrible retribution for that night’s work was now coming on her!

He again walked to the window to think how he might answer

these questions. Must he tell his daughter? Must he banish this criminal at once from his house? Every one now had been told of his intended marriage; every one had been told through Lord Alston, Mr. Furnival, and such as they. That at any rate must now be untold. And would it be possible that she should remain there, living with them at The Cleeve, while all this was being done? In truth he did not know how to speak. He had not hardness of heart to pronounce her doom.

‘Of course I shall leave the house,’ she said, with something almost of pride in her voice. ‘If there be no place open to me but a gaol I will do that. Perhaps I had better go now and get my things removed at once. Say a word of love for me to her;—a word of respectful love.’ And she moved as though she were going to the door.

But he would not permit her to leave him thus. He could not let the poor, crushed, broken creature wander forth in her agony to bruise herself at every turn, and to be alone in her despair. She was still the woman whom he had loved; and, over and beyond that, was she not the woman who had saved him from a terrible downfall by rushing herself into utter ruin for his sake? He must take some steps in her behalf—if he could only resolve what those steps should be. She was moving to the door, but stopping her, he took her by the hand. ‘You did it,’ he said, ‘and he, your husband, knew nothing of it?’ The fact itself was so wonderful, that he had hardly as yet made even that all his own.

‘I did it, and he knew nothing of it. I will go now, Sir Peregrine; I am strong enough.’

‘But where will you go?’

‘Ah me, where shall I go?’ And she put the hand which was at liberty up to her temple, brushing back her hair as though she might thus collect her thoughts. ‘Where shall I go? But he does not know it yet. I will go now to Orley Farm. When must he be told? Tell me that. When must he know it?’

‘No, Lady Mason; you cannot go there to-day. It’s very hard to say what you had better do.’

‘Very hard,’ she echoed, shaking her head.

‘But you must remain here at present;—at The Cleeve I mean; at any rate for to-day. I will think about it. I will endeavour to think what may be the best.’

‘But—we cannot meet now. She and I;—Mrs. Orme?’ And then again he was silent; for in truth the difficulties were too many for him. Might it not be best that she should counterfeit illness and be confined to her own room? But then he was averse to recommend any counterfeit; and if Mrs. Orme did not go to her in her assumed illness, the counterfeit would utterly fail of effect in the household. And then, should he tell Mrs. Orme? The weight

of these tidings would be too much for him, if he did not share them with some one. So he made up his mind that he must tell them to her—though to no other one.

‘I must tell her,’ he said.

‘Oh yes,’ she replied; and he felt her hand tremble in his, and dropped it. He had forgotten that he thus held her as all these thought pressed upon his brain.

‘I will tell it to her, but to no one else. If I might advise you, I would say that it will be well for you now to take some rest. You are agitated, and——’

‘Agitated! yes. But you are right, Sir Peregrine. I will go at once to my room. And then——’

‘Then, perhaps,—in the course of the morning, you will see me again.’

‘Where?—will you come to me there?’

‘I will see you in her room, in her dressing-room. She will be down stairs, you know.’ From which last words the tidings were conveyed to Lady Mason that she was not to see Mrs. Orme again.

And then she went, and as she slowly made her way across the hall she felt that all of evil, all of punishment that she had ever anticipated, had now fallen upon her. There are periods in the lives of some of us—I trust but of few—when, with the silent inner voice of suffering, we call on the mountains to fall and crush us, and on the earth to gape open and take us in. When, with an agony of intensity, we wish that our mothers had been barren. In those moments the poorest and most desolate are objects to us of envy, for their sufferings can be as nothing to our own. Lady Mason, as she crept silently across the hall, saw a servant girl pass down towards the entrance to the kitchen, and would have given all, all that she had in the world, to have changed places with that girl. But no change was possible to her. Neither would the mountains crush her, nor would the earth take her in. There was her burden, and she must bear it to the end. There was the bed which she had made for herself, and she must lie upon it. No escape was possible to her. She had herself mixed the cup, and she must now drink of it to the dregs.

Slowly and very silently she made her way up to her own room, and having closed the door behind her sat herself down upon the bed. It was as yet early in the morning, and the servant had not been in the chamber. There was no fire there although it was still mid-winter. Of such details as these Sir Peregrine had remembered nothing when he recommended her to go to her own room. Nor did she think of them at first as she placed herself on the bed-side. But soon the bitter air pierced her through and through, and she shivered with the cold as she sat there. After a while she got herself a shawl, wrapped it close around her, and then sat down

again. She bethought herself that she might have to remain in this way for hours, so she rose again and locked the door. It would add greatly to her immediate misery if the servants were to come while she was there, and see her in her wretchedness. Presently the girls did come, and being unable to obtain entrance were told by Lady Mason that she wanted the chamber for the present. Whereupon they offered to light the fire, but she declared that she was not cold. Her teeth were shaking in her head, but any suffering was better than the suffering of being seen.

She did not lie down, or cover herself further than she was covered with that shawl, nor did she move from her place for more than an hour. By degrees she became used to the cold. She was numbed, and, as it were, half dead in all her limbs, but she had ceased to shake as she sat there, and her mind had gone back to the misery of her position. There was so much for her behind that was worse! What should she do when even this retirement should not be allowed to her? Instead of longing for the time when she should be summoned to meet Sir Peregrine, she dreaded its coming. It would bring her nearer to that other meeting when she would have to bow her head and crouch before her son.

She had been there above an hour and was in truth ill with the cold when she heard,—and scarcely heard,—a light step come quickly along the passage towards her door. Her woman's ear instantly told her who owned that step, and her heart once more rose with hope. Was she coming there to comfort her, to speak to the poor bruised sinner one word of feminine sympathy? The quick light step stopped at the door, there was a pause, and then a low, low knock was heard. Lady Mason asked no question, but dropping from the bed hurried to the door and turned the key. She turned the key, and as the door was opened half hid herself behind it;—and then Mrs. Orme was in the room.

‘What! you have no fire?’ she said, feeling that the air struck her with a sudden chill. ‘Oh, this is dreadful! My poor, poor dear!’ And then she took hold of both Lady Mason’s hands. Had she possessed the wisdom of the serpent as well as the innocence of the dove she could not have been wiser in her first mode of addressing the sufferer. For she knew it all. During that dreadful hour Sir Peregrine had told her the whole story; and very dreadful that hour had been to her. He, when he attempted to give counsel in the matter, had utterly failed. He had not known what to suggest, nor could she say what it might be wisest for them all to do; but on one point her mind had been at once resolved. The woman who had once been her friend, whom she had learned to love, should not leave the house without some sympathy and womanly care. The guilt was very bad; yes, it was terrible; she acknowledged that it was a thing to be thought of only with shud-

dering. But the guilt of twenty years ago did not strike her senses so vividly as the abject misery of the present day. There was no pity in her bosom for Mr. Joseph Mason when she heard the story, but she was full of pity for her who had committed the crime. It was twenty years ago, and had not the sinner repented? Besides, was she to be the judge? 'Judge not, and ye shall not be judged,' she said, when she thought that Sir Peregrine spoke somewhat harshly in the matter. So she said, altogether misinterpreting the Scripture in her desire to say something in favour of the poor woman.

But when it was hinted to her that Lady Mason might return to Orley Farm without being again seen by her, her woman's heart at once rebelled. 'If she has done wrong,' said Mrs. Orme—

'She has done great wrong—fearful wrong,' said Sir Peregrine.

'It will not hurt me to see her because she has done wrong. Not see her while she is in the house! If she were in the prison, would I not go to see her?' And then Sir Peregrine had said no more, but he loved his daughter-in-law all the better for her unwonted vehemence.

'You will do what is right,' he said—'as you always do.' Then he left her; and she, after standing for a few moments while she shaped her thoughts, went straight away to Lady Mason's room.

She took Lady Mason by both her hands and found that they were icy cold. 'Oh, this is dreadful,' she said. 'Come with me, dear.' But Lady Mason still stood, up by the bed-head, whither she had retreated from the door. Her eyes were still cast upon the ground and she leaned back as Mrs. Orme held her, as though by her weight she would hinder her friend from leading her from the room.

'You are frightfully cold,' said Mrs. Orme.

'Has he told you?' said Lady Mason, asking the question in the lowest possible whisper, and still holding back as she spoke.

'Yes; he has told me;—but no one else—no one else.' And then for a few moments nothing was spoken between them.

'Oh, that I could die!' said the poor wretch, expressing in words that terrible wish that the mountains might fall upon her and crush her.

'You must not say that. That would be wicked, you know. He can comfort you. Do you not know that He will comfort you, if you are sorry for your sins and go to Him?'

But the woman in her intense suffering could not acknowledge to herself any idea of comfort. 'Ah, me!' she exclaimed, with a deep bursting sob which went straight to Mrs. Orme's heart. And then a convulsive fit of trembling seized her so strongly that Mrs. Orme could hardly continue to hold her hands.

'You are ill with the cold,' she said. 'Come with me, Lady Mason, you shall not stay here longer.'

Lady Mason then permitted herself to be led out of the room, and the two went quickly down the passage to the head of the front stairs, and from thence to Mrs. Orme's room. In crossing the house they had seen no one and been seen by no one; and Lady Mason when she came to the door hurried in, that she might again hide herself in security for the moment. As soon as the door was closed Mrs. Orme placed her in an arm-chair which she wheeled up to the front of the fire, and seating herself on a stool at the poor sinner's feet, chafed her hands within her own. She took away the shawl and made her stretch out her feet towards the fire, and thus seated close to her, she spoke no word for the next half-hour as to the terrible fact that had become known to her. Then, on a sudden, as though the ice of her heart had thawed from the warmth of the other's kindness, Lady Mason burst into a flood of tears, and flinging herself upon her friend's neck and bosom begged with earnest piteousness to be forgiven.

And Mrs. Orme did forgive her. Many will think that she was wrong to do so, and I fear it must be acknowledged that she was not strong minded. By forgiving her I do not mean that she pronounced absolution for the sin of past years, or that she endeavoured to make the sinner think that she was no worse for her sin. Mrs. Orme was a good churchwoman but not strong, individually, in points of doctrine. All that she left mainly to the woman's conscience and her own dealings with her Saviour,—merely saying a word of salutary counsel as to a certain spiritual pastor who might be of aid. But Mrs. Orme forgave her,—as regarded herself. She had already, while all this was unknown, taken this woman to her heart as pure and good. It now appeared that the woman had not been pure, had not been good!—And then she took her to her heart again! Criminal as the woman was, disgraced and debased, subject almost to the heaviest penalties of outraged law and justice, a felon against whom the actual hands of the law's myrmidons would probably soon prevail, a creature doomed to bear the scorn of the lowest of her fellow-creatures,—such as she was, this other woman, pure and high, so shielded from the world's impurity that nothing ignoble might touch her,—this lady took her to her heart again and promised in her ear with low sweet words of consolation that they should still be friends. I cannot say that Mrs. Orme was right. That she was weak minded I feel nearly certain. But, perhaps, this weakness of mind may never be brought against her to her injury, either in this world or in the next.

I will not pretend to give the words which passed between them at that interview. After a while Lady Mason allowed herself to be guided all in all by her friend's advice as though she herself had been a child. It was decided that for the present,—that is for

the next day or two—Lady Mason should keep her room at The Cleeve as an invalid. Counterfeit in this there would be none certainly, for indeed she was hardly fit for any place but her own bed. If inclined and able to leave her room, she should be made welcome to the use of Mrs. Orme's dressing-room. It would only be necessary to warn Peregrine that for the present he must abstain from coming there. The servants, Mrs. Orme said, had heard of their master's intended marriage. They would now hear that this intention had been abandoned. On this they would put their own construction, and would account in their own fashion for the fact that Sir Peregrine and his guest no longer saw each other. But no suspicion of the truth would get abroad when it was seen that Lady Mason was still treated as a guest at The Cleeve. As to such future steps as might be necessary to be taken, Mrs. Orme would consult with Sir Peregrine, and tell Lady Mason from time to time. And as for the sad truth, the terrible truth,—that, at any rate for the present, should be told to no other ears. And so the whole morning was spent, and Mrs. Orme saw neither Sir Peregrine nor her son till she went down to the library in the first gloom of the winter evening.

CHAPTER VI.

A WOMAN'S IDEA OF FRIENDSHIP.

SIR PEREGRINE after the hour that he had spent with his daughter-in-law,—that terrible hour during which Lady Mason had sat alone on the bed-side—returned to the library and remained there during the whole of the afternoon. It may be remembered that he had agreed to ride through the woods with his grandson; but that purpose had been abandoned early in the day, and Peregrine had in consequence been hanging about the house. He soon perceived that something was amiss, but he did not know what. He had looked for his mother, and had indeed seen her for a moment at her door; but she had told him that she could not then speak to him. Sir Peregrine also had shut himself up, but about the hour of dusk he sent for his grandson; and when Mrs. Orme, on leaving Lady Mason, went down to the library, she found them both together.

They were standing with their backs to the fire, and the gloom in the room was too dark to allow of their faces being seen, but she felt that the conversation between them was of a serious nature. Indeed what conversation in that house could be other than serious on that day? 'I see that I am disturbing you,' she

said, preparing to retreat. 'I did not know that you were together.'

'Do not go, Edith,' said the old man. 'Peregrine, put a chair for your mother. I have told him that all this is over now between me and Lady Mason.'

She trembled as she heard the words, for it seemed to her that there must be danger now in even speaking of Lady Mason,—danger with reference to that dreadful secret, the divulging of which would be so fatal.

'I have told him,' continued Sir Peregrine, 'that for a few minutes I was angry with him when I heard from Lady Mason that he had spoken to her; but I believe that on the whole it is better that it should have been so.'

'He would be very unhappy if anything that he had done had distressed you,' said Mrs. Orme, hardly knowing what words to use, or how to speak. Nor did she feel quite certain as yet how much had been told to her son, and how much was concealed from him.

'No, no, no,' said the old man, laying his arm affectionately on the young man's shoulder. 'He has done nothing to distress me. There is nothing wrong—nothing wrong between him and me. Thank God for that. But, Perry, we will think now of that other matter. Have you told your mother anything about it?' And he strove to look away from the wretchedness of his morning's work to something in his family that still admitted of a bright hope.

'No, sir; not yet. We won't mind that just now.' And then they all remained silent, Mrs. Orme sitting, and the two men still standing with their backs towards the fire. Her mind was too intent on the unfortunate lady upstairs to admit of her feeling interest in that other unknown matter to which Sir Peregrine had alluded.

'If you have done with Perry,' she said at last, 'I would be glad to speak to you for a minute or two.'

'Oh yes,' said Peregrine;—'we have done.' And then he went.

'You have told him,' said she, as soon as they were left together.

'Told him; what, of her? Oh no. I have told him that that,—that idea of mine has been abandoned.' From this time forth Sir Peregrine could never endure to speak of his proposed marriage, nor to hear it spoken of. 'He conceives that this has been done at her instance,' he continued.

'And so it has,' said Mrs. Orme, with much more of decision in her voice than was customary with her.

'And so it has,' he repeated after her.

'Nobody must know of this,'—said she very solemnly, standing up and looking into his face with eager eyes. 'Nobody but you and I.'

'All the world, I fear, will know it soon,' said Sir Peregrine.

‘No; no. Why should all the world know it? Had she not told us we should not have known it. We should not have suspected it. Mr. Furnival, who understands these things;—he does not think her guilty.’

‘But, Edith—the property!’

‘Let her give that up—after a while; when all this has passed by. That man is not in want. It will not hurt him to be without it a little longer. It will be enough for her to do that when this trial shall be over.’

‘But it is not hers. She cannot give it up. It belongs to her son,—or is thought to belong to him. It is not for us to be informers, Edith—’

‘No, no; it is not for us to be informers. We must remember that.’

‘Certainly. It is not for us to tell the story of her guilt; but her guilt will remain the same, will be acted over and over again every day, while the proceeds of the property go into the hands of Lucius Mason. It is that which is so terrible, Edith;—that her conscience should have been able to bear that load for the last twenty years! A deed done,—that admits of no restitution, may admit of repentance. We may leave that to the sinner and his conscience, hoping that he stands right with his Maker. But here, with her, there has been a continual theft going on from year to year,—which is still going on. While Lucius Mason holds a sod of Orley Farm, true repentance with her must be impossible. It seems so to me.’ And Sir Peregrine shuddered at the doom which his own rectitude of mind and purpose forced him to pronounce.

‘It is not she that has it,’ said Mrs. Orme. ‘It was not done for herself.’

‘There is no difference in that,’ said he sharply. ‘All sin is selfish, and so was her sin in this. Her object was the aggrandizement of her own child; and when she could not accomplish that honestly, she did it by fraud, and—and—and——. Edith, my dear, you and I must look at this thing as it is. You must not let your kind heart make your eyes blind in a matter of such moment.’

‘No, father; nor must the truth make our hearts cruel. You talk of restitution and repentance. Repentance is not the work of a day. How are we to say by what struggles her poor heart has been torn?’

‘I do not judge her.’

‘No, no; that is it. We may not judge her; may we? But we may assist her in her wretchedness. I have promised that I will do all I can to aid her. You will allow me to do so;—you will; will you not?’ And she pressed his arm and looked up into his face, entreating him. Since first they two had known each other,

he had never yet denied her a request. It was a law of his life that he would never do so. But now he hesitated, not thinking that he would refuse her, but feeling that on such an occasion it would be necessary to point out to her how far she might go without risk of bringing censure on her own name. But in this case, though the mind of Sir Peregrine might be the more logical, the purpose of his daughter-in law was the stronger. She had resolved that such communication with crime would not stain her, and she already knew to what length she would go in her charity. Indeed, her mind was fully resolved to go far enough.

'I hardly know as yet what she intends to do; any assistance that you can give her must, I should say, depend on her own line of conduct.'

'But I want your advice as to that. I tell you what I purpose. It is clear that Mr. Furnival thinks she will gain the day at this trial.'

'But Mr. Furnival does not know the truth.'

'Nor will the judge and the lawyers, and all the rest. As you say so properly, it is not for us to be the informers. If they can prove it, let them. But you would not have her tell them all against herself?' And then she paused, waiting for his answer.

'I do not know. I do not know what to say. It is not for me to advise her.'

'Ah, but it is for you,' she said; and as she spoke she put her little hand down on the table with an energy which startled him. 'She is here—a wretched woman, in your house. And why do you know the truth? Why has it been told to you and me? Because without telling it she could not turn you from that purpose of yours. It was generous, father—confess that; it was very generous.'

'Yes, it was generous,' said Sir Peregrine.

'It was very generous. It would be base in us if we allowed ourselves to forget that. But I was telling you my plan. She must go to this trial.'

'Oh yes; there will be no doubt as to that.'

'Then—if she can escape, let the property be given up afterwards.'

'I do not see how it is to be arranged. The property will belong to Lucius, and she cannot give it up then. It is not so easy to put matters right when guilt and fraud have set them wrong.'

'We will do the best we can. Even suppose that you were to tell Lucius afterwards;—you yourself! if that were necessary, you know.'

And so by degrees she talked him over; but yet he would come to no decision as to what steps he himself must take. What if he himself should go to Mr. Round, and pledge himself that the whole estate should be restored to Mr. Mason of Groby, on condition that

the trial were abandoned? The world would probably guess the truth after that; but the terrible trial and the more terrible punishment which would follow it might be thus escaped. Poor Sir Peregrine! Even when he argued thus within himself, his conscience told him that in taking such a line of conduct, he himself would be guilty of some outrage against the law by aiding a criminal in her escape. He had heard of misprision of felony; but nevertheless, he allowed his daughter-in-law to prevail. Before such a step as this could be taken the consent of Lady Mason must of course be obtained; but as to that Mrs. Orme had no doubt. If Lucius could be induced to abandon the property without hearing the whole story, it would be well. But if that could not be achieved,—then the whole story must be told to him. ‘And you will tell it,’ Mrs. Orme said to him. ‘It would be easier for me to cut off my right arm,’ he answered; ‘but I will do my best.’

And then came the question as to the place of Lady Mason’s immediate residence. It was evident to Mrs. Orme that Sir Peregrine expected that she would at once go back to Orley Farm;—not exactly on that day, nor did he say on the day following. But his words made it very manifest that he did not think it right that she should under existing circumstances remain at the Cleeve. Sir Peregrine, however, as quickly understood that Mrs. Orme did not wish her to go away for some days.

‘It would injure the cause if she were to leave us quite at once,’ said Mrs. Orme.

‘But how can she stay here, my dear,—with no one to see her; with none but the servants to wait upon her?’

‘I should see her,’ said Mrs. Orme, boldly.

‘Do you mean constantly—in your old, friendly way?’

‘Yes, constantly; and,’ she added after a pause, ‘not only here, but at Orley Farm also.’ And then there was another pause between them.

Sir Peregrine certainly was not a cruel man, nor was his heart by any means hardened against the lady with whom circumstances had lately joined him so closely. Indeed, since the knowledge of her guilt had fully come upon him, he had undertaken the conduct of her perilous affairs in a manner more confidential even than that which had existed while he expected to make her his wife. But, nevertheless, it went sorely against the grain with him when it was proposed that there should still exist a close intimacy between the one cherished lady of his household and the woman who had been guilty of so base a crime. It seemed to him that he might touch pitch and not be defiled;—he or any man belonging to him. But he could not reconcile it to himself that the widow of his son should run such risk. In his estimation there was something almost more than human about the purity of the only woman that

blessed his hearth. It seemed to him as though she were a sacred thing, to be guarded by a shrine,—to be protected from all contact with the pollutions of the outer world. And now it was proposed to him that she should take a felon to her bosom as her friend!

‘But will that be necessary, Edith?’ he said; ‘and after all that has been revealed to us now, will it be wise?’

‘I think so,’ she said, speaking again with a very low voice. ‘Why should I not?’

‘Because she has shown herself unworthy of such friendship;—unfit for it I should say.’

‘Unworthy! Dear father, is she not as worthy and as fit as she was yesterday? If we saw clearly into each other’s bosoms, whom should we think worthy?’

‘But you would not choose for your friend one—one who could do such a deed as that?’

‘No; I would not choose her because she had so acted; nor perhaps if I knew all beforehand would I open my heart to one who had so done. But it is different now. What are love and friendship worth if they cannot stand against such trials as these?’

‘Do you mean, Edith, that no crime would separate you from a friend?’

‘I have not said that. There are circumstances always. But if she repents,—as I am sure she does, I cannot bring myself to desert her. Who else is there that can stand by her now; what other woman? At any rate I have promised her, and you would not have me break my word.’

Thus she again gained her point, and it was settled that for the present Lady Mason should be allowed to occupy her own room,—her own room, and occasionally Mrs. Orme’s sitting-room, if it pleased her to do so. No day was named for her removal, but Mrs. Orme perfectly understood that the sooner such a day could be fixed the better Sir Peregrine would be pleased. And, indeed, his household as at present arranged was not a pleasant one. The servants had all heard of his intended marriage, and now they must also hear that that intention was abandoned. And yet the lady would remain up stairs as a guest of his! There was much in this that was inconvenient; but under circumstances as they now existed, what could he do?

When all this was arranged and Mrs. Orme had dressed for dinner, she again went to Lady Mason. She found her in bed, and told her that at night she would come to her and tell her all. And then she instructed her own servant as to attending upon the invalid. In doing this she was cunning in letting a word fall here and there, that might teach the woman that that marriage purpose was all over; but nevertheless there was so much care and apparent affection in her mode of speaking, and she gave her orders for Lady

Mason's comfort with so much earnestness, that no idea could get abroad in the household that there had been any cause for absolute quarrel.

Late at night, when her son had left her, she did go again to her guest's room, and sitting down by the bedside she told her all that had been planned, pointing out however with much care that, as a part of those plans, Orley Farm was to be surrendered to Joseph Mason. 'You think that is right; do you not?' said Mrs. Orme, almost trembling as she asked a question so pertinent to the deed which the other had done, and to that repentance for the deed which was now so much to be desired.

'Yes,' said the other, 'of course it will be right.' And then the thought that it was not in her power to abandon the property occurred to her also. If the estate must be voluntarily surrendered, no one could so surrender it but Lucius Mason. She knew this, and felt at the moment that of all men he would be the least likely to do so, unless an adequate reason was made clearly plain to him. The same thought at the same moment was passing through the minds of them both; but Lady Mason could not speak out her thought, and Mrs. Orme would not say more on that terrible day to trouble the mind of the poor creature whose sufferings she was so anxious to assuage.

And then Lady Mason was left alone, and having now a partner in her secret, slept sounder than she had done since the tidings first reached her of Mr. Dockwrath's vengeance.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GEM OF THE FOUR FAMILIES.

AND now we will go back to Noningsby. On that evening Graham ate his pheasant with a relish although so many cares sat heavy on his mind, and declared, to Mrs. Baker's great satisfaction, that the cook had managed to preserve the bread sauce uninjured through all the perils of delay which it had encountered.

'Bread sauce is so ticklish; a simmer too much and it's clean done for,' Mrs. Baker said with a voice of great solicitude. But she had been accustomed perhaps to patients whose appetites were fastidious. The pheasant and the bread sauce and the mashed potatoes, all prepared by Mrs. Baker's own hands to be eaten as spoon meat, disappeared with great celerity; and then, as Graham sat sipping the solitary glass of sherry that was allowed to him, meditating that he would begin his letter the moment the glass was empty, Augustus Staveley again made his appearance.

‘Well, old fellow,’ said he, ‘how are you now?’ and he was particularly careful so to speak as to show by his voice that his affection for his friend was as strong as ever. But in doing so he showed also that there was some special thought still present in his mind,—some feeling which was serious in its nature if not absolutely painful.

‘Staveley,’ said the other, gravely, ‘I have acquired knowledge to-day which I trust I may carry with me to my grave.’

‘And what is that?’ said Augustus, looking round to Mrs. Baker as though he thought it well that she should be out of the room before the expected communication was made. But Mrs. Baker’s attention was so riveted by her patient’s earnestness, that she made no attempt to go.

‘It is a wasting of the best gifts of Providence,’ said Graham, ‘to eat a pheasant after one has really done one’s dinner.’

‘Oh, that’s it, is it?’ said Augustus.

‘So it is, sir,’ said Mrs. Baker, thinking that the subject quite justified the manner.

‘And of no use whatsoever to eat only a little bit of one as a man does then. To know what a pheasant is you should have it all to yourself.’

‘So you should, sir,’ said Mrs. Baker, quite delighted and very much in earnest.

‘And you should have nothing else. Then, if the bird be good to begin with, and has been well hung——’

‘There’s a deal it that,’ said Mrs. Baker.

‘Then, I say, you’ll know what a pheasant is. That’s the lesson which I have learned to-day, and I give it you as an adequate return for the pheasant itself.’

‘I was almost afraid it would be spoilt by being brought up the second time,’ said Mrs. Baker. ‘And so I said to my lady; but she wouldn’t have you woke, nohow.’ And then Mrs. Baker, having heard the last of the lecture, took away the empty wine-glass and shut the door behind her.

‘And now I’ll write those two letters,’ said Graham. ‘What I’ve written hitherto I wrote in bed, and I feel almost more awkward now I am up than I did then.’

‘But what letters are they?’

‘Well, one to my laundress to tell her I shall be there to-morrow, and one to Mary Snow to say that I’ll see her the day after.’

‘Then, Felix, don’t trouble yourself to write either. You positively won’t go to-morrow——’

‘Who says so?’

‘The governor. He has heard from my mother exactly what the doctor said, and declares that he won’t allow it. He means to see the doctor himself before you stir. And he wants to see

you also. I am to tell you he'll come to you directly after breakfast.'

'I shall be delighted to see your father, and am very much gratified by his kindness, but——'

'But what——'

'I'm a free agent, I suppose,—to go when I please?'

'Not exactly. The law is unwritten; but by traditional law a man laid up in his bedroom is not free to go and come. No action for false imprisonment would lie if Mrs. Baker kept all your clothes away from you.'

'I should like to try the question.'

'You will have the opportunity, for you may be sure that you'll not leave this to-morrow.'

'It would depend altogether on the evidence of the doctor.'

'Exactly so. And as the doctor in this case would clearly be on the side of the defendants, a verdict on behalf of the plaintiff would not be by any means attainable.' After that the matter was presumed to be settled, and Graham said no more as to leaving Noningsby on the next day. As things turned out afterwards he remained there for another week.

'I must at any rate write a letter to Mary Snow,' he said. And to Mary Snow he did write some three or four lines, Augustus sitting by the while. Augustus Staveley would have been very glad to know the contents, or rather the spirit of those lines; but nothing was said about them, and the letter was at last sealed up and intrusted to his care for the post-bag. There was very little in it that could have interested Augustus Staveley or any one else. It contained the ordinary, but no more than the ordinary terms of affection. He told her that he found it impracticable to move himself quite immediately. And then as to that cause of displeasure,—that cause of supposed displeasure as to which both Mary and Mrs. Thomas had written, he declared that he did not believe that anything had been done that he should not find it easy to forgive after so long an absence.

Augustus then remained there for another hour, but not a word was said between the young men on that subject which was nearest, at the moment, to the hearts of both of them. Each was thinking of Madeline, but neither of them spoke as though any such subject were in their thoughts.

'Heaven and earth!' said Augustus at last, pulling out his watch. 'It only wants three minutes to seven. I shall have a dozen messages from the judge before I get down, to know whether he shall come and help me change my boots. I'll see you again before I go to bed. Good-bye, old fellow.' And then Graham was again alone.

If Lady Staveley were really angry with him for loving her

daughter,—if his friend Staveley were in very truth determined that such love must under no circumstances be sanctioned,—would they treat him as they were treating him? Would they under such circumstances make his prolonged stay in the house an imperative necessity? He could not help asking himself this question, and answering it with some gleam of hope. And then he acknowledged to himself that it was ungenerous in him to do so. His remaining there,—the liberty to remain there which had been conceded to him,—had arisen solely from the belief that a removal in his present state would be injudicious. He assured himself of this over and over again, so that no false hope might linger in his heart. And yet hope did linger there whether false or true. Why might he not aspire to the hand of Madeline Staveley,—he who had been assured that he need regard no woman as too high for his aspirations?

‘Mrs. Baker,’ he said that evening, as that excellent woman was taking away his tea-things, ‘I have not heard Miss Staveley’s voice these two days.’

‘Well, no; no more you have,’ said she. ‘There’s two ways, you know, Mr. Graham, of going to her part of the house. There’s the door that opens at the end of the passage by her mamma’s room. She’s been that way, and that’s the reason, I suppose. There aint no other, I’m sure.’

‘One likes to hear one’s friends if one can’t see them; that’s all.’

‘To be sure one does. I remember as how when I had the measles—I was living with my lady’s mother, as maid to the young ladies. There was four of ’em, and I dressed ’em all—God bless ’em. They’ve all got husbands now and grown families—only there aint one among ’em equal to our Miss Madeline, though there’s some of ’em much richer. When my lady married him,—the judge, you know,—he was the poorest of the lot. They didn’t think so much of him when he came a-courting in those days.’

‘He was only a practising barrister then.’

‘Oh yes; he knew well how to practise, for Miss Isabella—as she was then—very soon made up her mind about him. Laws, Mr. Graham, she used to tell me everything in them days. They didn’t want her to have nothing to say to Mr. Staveley at first; but she made up her mind, and though she wasn’t one of them as has many words, like Miss Fumival down there, there was no turning her.’

‘Did she marry at last against their wish?’

‘Oh dear, no; nothing of that sort. She wasn’t one of them flighty ones neither. She just made up her own mind and bided. And now I don’t know whether she hasn’t done about the best of ’em all. Them Oliphants is full of money, they do say—full of money. That was Miss Louisa, who came next. But, Lord love you, Mr. Graham, he’s so crammed with gout as he can’t ever put a foot to the ground; and as cross;—as cross as cross. We goes

there sometimes, you know. Then the girls is all plain; and young Mr. Oliphant, the son,—why he never so much as speaks to his own father; and though they're rolling in money, they say he can't pay for the coat on his back. Now our Mr. Augustus, unless it is that he won't come down to morning prayers and always keeps the dinner waiting, I don't think there's ever a black look between him and his papa. And as for Miss Madeline,—she's the gem of the four families. Everybody gives that up to her.'

If Madeline's mother married a barrister in opposition to the wishes of her family—a barrister who then possessed nothing but his wits—why should not Madeline do so also? That was of course the line which his thoughts took? But then, as he said to himself, Madeline's father had been one of the handsomest men of his day, whereas he was one of the ugliest; and Madeline's father had been encumbered with no Mary Snow. A man who had been such a fool as he, who had gone so far out of the regular course, thinking to be wiser than other men, but being in truth much more silly, could not look for that success and happiness in life which men enjoy who have not been so lamentably deficient in discretion! 'Twas thus that he lectured himself; but still he went on thinking of Madeline Staveley.

There had been some disagreeable confusion in the house that afternoon after Augustus had spoken to his sister. Madeline had gone up to her own room, and had remained there, chewing the cud of her thoughts. Both her sister and her brother had warned her about this man. She could moreover divine that her mother was suffering under some anxiety on the same subject. Why was all this? Why should these things be said and thought? Why should there be uneasiness in the house on her account in this matter of Mr. Graham? She acknowledged to herself that there was such uneasiness;—and she almost acknowledged to herself the cause.

But while she was still sitting over her own fire, with her needle untouched beside her, her father had come home, and Lady Staveley had mentioned to him that Mr. Graham thought of going on the next day.

'Nonsense, my dear,' said the judge. 'He must not think of such a thing. He can hardly be fit to leave his room yet.'

'Pottinger does say that it has gone on very favourably,' pleaded Lady Staveley.

'But that's no reason he should destroy the advantages of his healthy constitution by insane imprudence. He's got nothing to do. He wants to go merely because he thinks he is in your way.'

Lady Staveley looked wishfully up in her husband's face, longing to tell him all her suspicions. But as yet her grounds for them were so slight that even to him she hesitated to mention them.

‘His being here is no trouble to me, of course,’ she said.

‘Of course not. You tell him so, and he’ll stay,’ said the judge. ‘I want to see him to-morrow myself;—about this business of poor Lady Mason’s.’

Immediately after that he met his son. And Augustus also told him that Graham was going.

‘Oh no; he’s not going at all,’ said the judge. ‘I’ve settled that with your mother.’

‘He’s very anxious to be off,’ said Augustus gravely.

‘And why? Is there any reason?’

‘Well; I don’t know.’ For a moment he thought he would tell his father the whole story; but he reflected that his doing so would be hardly fair towards his friend. ‘I don’t know that there is any absolute reason; but I’m quite sure that he is very anxious to go.’

The judge at once perceived that there was something in the wind, and during that hour in which the pheasant was being discussed up in Graham’s room, he succeeded in learning the whole from his wife. Dear, good, loving wife! A secret of any kind from him was an impossibility to her, although that secret went no further than her thoughts.

‘The darling girl is so anxious about him, that—that I’m afraid,’ said she.

‘He’s by no means a bad sort of man, my love,’ said the judge.

‘But he’s got nothing—literally nothing,’ said the mother.

‘Neither had I, when I went a wooing,’ said the judge. ‘But, nevertheless, I managed to have it all my own way.’

‘You don’t mean really to make a comparison?’ said Lady Staveley. ‘In the first place you were at the top of your profession.’

‘Was I? If so I must have achieved that distinction at a very early age.’ And then he kissed his wife very affectionately. Nobody was there to see, and under such circumstances a man may kiss his wife even though he be a judge, and between fifty and sixty years old. After that he again spoke to his son, and in spite of the resolves which Augustus had made as to what friendship required of him, succeeded in learning the whole truth.

Late in the evening, when all the party had drunk their cups of tea, when Lady Staveley was beginning her nap, and Augustus was making himself agreeable to Miss Furnival—to the great annoyance of his mother, who half rousing herself every now and then, looked sorrowfully at what was going on with her winking eyes,—the judge contrived to withdraw with Madeline into the small drawing-room, telling her as he put his arm round her waist, that he had a few words to say to her.

‘Well, papa,’ said she, as at his bidding she sat herself down beside him on the sofa. She was frightened, because such sum-

monses were very unusual; but nevertheless her father's manner towards her was always so full of love that even in her fear she felt a comfort in being with him.

'My darling,' he said, 'I want to ask you one or two questions—about our guest here who has hurt himself,—Mr. Graham.'

'Yes, papa.' And now she knew that she was trembling with nervous dread.

'You need not think that I am in the least angry with you, or that I suspect you of having done or said, or even thought anything that is wrong. I feel quite confident that I have no cause to do so.'

'Oh, thank you, papa.'

'But I want to know whether Mr. Graham has ever spoken to you—as a lover.'

'Never, papa.'

'Because under the circumstances of his present stay here, his doing so would, I think, have been ungenerous.'

'He never has, papa, in any way—not a single word.'

'And you have no reason to regard him in that light.'

'No, papa.' But in the speaking of these last two words there was a slight hesitation,—the least possible shade of doubt conveyed, which made itself immediately intelligible to the practised ear of the judge.

'Tell me all, my darling;—everything that there is in your heart, so that we may help each other if that may be possible.'

'He has never said anything to me, papa.'

'Because your mamma thinks that you are more anxious about him than you would be about an ordinary visitor.'

'Does she?'

'Has any one else spoken to you about Mr. Graham?'

'Augustus did, papa; and Isabella, some time ago.'

'Then I suppose they thought the same.'

'Yes; I suppose they did.'

'And now, dear, is there anything else you would like to say to me about it?'

'No, papa, I don't think there is.'

'But remember this always;—that my only wishes respecting you, and your mother's wishes also, are to see you happy and good.'

'I am very happy, papa.'

'And very good also to the best of my belief.' And then he kissed her, and they went back again into the large drawing-room.

Many of my readers, and especially those who are old and wise,—if I chance to have any such—will be inclined to think that the judge behaved foolishly in thus cross-questioning his daughter on a matter, which, if it were expedient that it should die away, would die away the more easily the less it were talked about. But the judge was an odd man in many of the theories of his life.

One of them, with reference to his children, was very odd, and altogether opposed to the usual practice of the world. It was this,—that they should be allowed, as far as was practicable, to do what they liked. Now the general opinion of the world is certainly quite the reverse—namely this, that children, as long as they are under the control of their parents, should be hindered and prevented in those things to which they are most inclined. Of course the world in general, in carrying out this practice, excuses it by an assertion,—made to themselves or others—that children customarily like those things which they ought not to like. But the judge had an idea quite opposed to this. Children, he said, if properly trained would like those things which were good for them. Now it may be that he thought his daughter had been properly trained.

‘He is a very clever young man, my dear; you may be sure of that,’ were the last words which the judge said to his wife that night.

‘But then he has got nothing,’ she replied; ‘and he is so uncommonly plain.’

The judge would not say a word more, but he could not help thinking that this last point was one which might certainly be left to the young lady.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ANGEL OF LIGHT UNDER A CLOUD.

ON the following morning, according to appointment, the judge visited Felix Graham in his room. It was only the second occasion on which he had done so since the accident, and he was therefore more inclined to regard him as an invalid than those who had seen him from day to day.

‘I am delighted to hear that your bones have been so amenable,’ said the judge. ‘But you must not try them too far. We’ll get you down stairs into the drawing-room, and see how you get on there by the next few days.’

‘I don’t want to trouble you more than I can help,’ said Felix, sheepishly. He knew that there were reasons why he should not go into that drawing-room, but of course he could not guess that those reasons were as well known to the judge as they were to himself.

‘You sha’n’t trouble us—more than you can help. I am not one of those men who tell my friends that nothing is a trouble. Of course you give trouble.’

‘I am so sorry!’

‘There’s your bed to make, my dear fellow, and your gruel to warm. You know Shakspeare pretty well by heart I believe, and he puts that matter,—as he did every other matter,—in the best and truest point of view. Lady Macbeth didn’t say she had no labour in receiving the king. “The labour we delight in physics pain,” she said. Those were her words, and now they are mine.’

‘With a more honest purpose behind,’ said Felix.

‘Well, yes; I’ve no murder in my thoughts at present. So that is all settled, and Lady Staveley will be delighted to see you down stairs to-morrow.’

‘I shall be only too happy,’ Felix answered, thinking within his own mind that he must settle it all in the course of the day with Augustus.

‘And now perhaps you will be strong enough to say a few words about business.’

‘Certainly,’ said Graham.

‘You have heard of this Orley Farm case, in which our neighbour Lady Mason is concerned.’

‘Oh yes; we were all talking of it at your table;—I think it was the night, or a night or two, before my accident.’

‘Very well; then you know all about it. At least as much as the public knows generally. It has now been decided on the part of Joseph Mason,—the husband’s eldest son, who is endeavouring to get the property—that she shall be indicted for perjury.’

‘For perjury!’

‘Yes; and in doing that, regarding the matter from his point of view, they are not deficient in judgment.’

‘But how could she have been guilty of perjury?’

‘In swearing that she had been present when her husband and the three witnesses executed the deed. If they have any ground to stand on—and I believe they have none whatever, but if they have, they would much more easily get a verdict against her on that point than on a charge of forgery. Supposing it to be the fact that her husband never executed such a deed, it would be manifest that she must have sworn falsely in swearing that she saw him do so.’

‘Why, yes; one would say so.’

‘But that would afford by no means conclusive evidence that she had forged the surreptitious deed herself.’

‘It would be strong presumptive evidence that she was cognizant of the forgery.’

‘Perhaps so,—but uncorroborated would hardly bring a verdict after such a lapse of years. And then moreover a prosecution for forgery, if unsuccessful, would produce more painful feeling. Whether successful or unsuccessful it would do so. Bail could not

be taken in the first instance, and such a prosecution would create a stronger feeling that the poor lady was being persecuted.'

'Those who really understand the matter will hardly thank them for their mercy.'

'But then so few will really understand it. The fact however is that she will be indicted for perjury. I do not know whether the indictment has not been already laid. Mr. Furnival was with me in town yesterday, and at his very urgent request, I discussed the whole subject with him. I shall be on the Home Circuit myself on these next spring assizes, but I shall not take the criminal business at Alston. Indeed I should not choose that this matter should be tried before me under any circumstances, seeing that the lady is my near neighbour. Now Furnival wants you to be engaged on the defence as junior counsel.'

'With himself?'

'Yes; with himself,—and with Mr. Chaffanbrass.'

'With Mr. Chaffanbrass!' said Graham, in a tone almost of horror—as though he had been asked to league himself with all that was most disgraceful in the profession;—as indeed perhaps he had been.

'Yes—with Mr. Chaffanbrass.'

'Will that be well, judge, do you think?'

'Mr. Chaffanbrass no doubt is a very clever man, and it may be wise in such a case as this to have the services of a barrister who is perhaps unequalled in his power of cross-examining a witness.'

'Does his power consist in making a witness speak the truth, or in making him conceal it?'

'Perhaps in both. But here, if it be the case as Mr. Furnival suspects, that witnesses will be suborned to give false evidence——'

'But surely the Rounds would have nothing to do with such a matter as that?'

'No, probably not. I am sure that old Richard Round would abhor any such work as you or I would do. They take the evidence as it is brought to them. I believe there is no doubt that at any rate one of the witnesses to the codicil in question will now swear that the signature to the document is not her signature.'

'A woman—is it?'

'Yes; a woman. In such a case it may perhaps be allowable to employ such a man as Mr. Chaffanbrass; and I should tell you also, such another man as Mr. Solomon Aram.'

'Solomon Aram, too! Why, judge, the Old Bailey will be left bare.'

'The shining lights will certainly be down at Alston. Now under those circumstances will you undertake the case?'

'Would you;—in my place?'

‘Yes; if I were fully convinced of the innocence of my client at the beginning.’

‘But what if I were driven to change my opinion as the thing progressed?’

‘You must go on, in such a case, as a matter of course.’

‘I suppose I can have a day or two to think of it?’

‘Oh yes. I should not myself be the bearer to you of Mr. Furnival’s message, were it not that I think that Lady Mason is being very cruelly used in the matter. If I were a young man in your position, I should take up the case *con amore*, for the sake of beauty and womanhood. I don’t say that that Quixotism is very wise; but still I don’t think it can be wrong to join yourself even with such men as Chaffanbrass and Mr. Solomon Aram, if you can feel confident that you have justice and truth on your side.’ Then after a few more words the interview was over, and the judge left the room making some further observation as to his hope of seeing Graham in the drawing-room on the next day.

On the following morning there came from Peckham two more letters for Graham, one of course from Mary Snow, and one from Mrs. Thomas. We will first give attention to that from the elder lady. She commenced with much awe, declaring that her pen trembled within her fingers, but that nevertheless she felt bound by her conscience and that duty which she owed to Mr. Graham, to tell him everything that had occurred,—‘word by word,’ as she expressed it. And then Felix, looking at the letter, saw that he held in his hand two sheets of letter paper, quite full of small writing, the latter of which was crossed. She went on to say that her care had been unremitting, and her solicitude almost maternal; that Mary’s conduct had on the whole been such as to inspire her with ‘undeviating confidence;’ but that the guile of the present age was such, especially in respect to female servants—who seemed, in Mrs. Thomas’s opinion to be sent in these days express from a very bad place for the express assistance of a very bad gentleman—that it was impossible for any woman, let her be ever so circumspect, to say ‘what was what, or who was who.’ From all which Graham learned that Mrs. Thomas had been ‘done;’ but by the middle of the third page he had as yet learned nothing as to the manner of the doing.

But by degrees the long reel unwinded itself;—angel of light, and all. Mary Snow had not only received but had answered a lover’s letter. She had answered that lover’s letter by making an appointment with him; and she had kept that appointment,—with the assistance of the agent sent express from that very bad gentleman. All this Mrs. Thomas had only discovered afterwards by finding the lover’s letter, and the answer which the angel of light had written. Both of these she copied verbatim, thinking probably

that the original documents were too precious to be intrusted to the post; and then ended by saying that an additional year of celibacy, passed under a closer espionage, and with more severe moral training, might still perhaps make Mary Snow fit for the high destiny which had been promised to her.

The only part of this letter which Felix read twice was that which contained the answer from the angel of light to her lover. 'You have been very wicked to address me,' the angel of light said severely. 'And it is almost impossible that I should ever forgive you!' If only she could have brought herself to end there! But her nature, which the lover had greatly belied in likening it to her name, was not cold enough for this. So she added a few more words very indiscreetly. 'As I want to explain to you why I can never see you again, I will meet you on Thursday afternoon, at half-past four, a little way up Clapham Lane, at the corner of the doctor's wall, just beyond the third lamp.' It was the first letter she had ever written to a lover, and the poor girl had betrayed herself by keeping a copy of it.

And then Graham came to Mary Snow's letter to himself, which, as it was short, the reader shall have entire.

'MY DEAR MR. GRAHAM,

'I never was so unhappy in my life, and I am sure I don't know how to write to you. Of course I do not think you will ever see me again unless it be to upbraid me for my perfidy, and I almost hope you won't, for I should sink into the ground before your eyes. And yet I didn't mean to do anything very wrong, and when I did meet him I wouldn't as much as let him take me by the hand;—not of my own accord. I don't know what she has said to you, and I think she ought to have let me read it; but she speaks to me now in such a way that I don't know how to bear it. She has rummaged among everything I have got, but I am sure she could find nothing except those two letters. It wasn't my fault that he wrote to me, though I know now I ought not to have met him. He is quite a genteel young man, and very respectable in the medical line; only I know that makes no difference now, seeing how good you have been to me. I don't ask you to forgive me, but it nearly kills me when I think of poor papa.

'Yours always, most unhappy, and very sorry for what I have done,
MARY SNOW.'

Poor Mary Snow! Could any man under such circumstances have been angry with her? In the first place if men will mould their wives, they must expect that kind of thing; and then, after all, was there any harm done? If ultimately he did marry Mary Snow, would she make a worse wife because she had met the apothecary's assistant at the corner of the doctor's wall, under the

third lamp-post? Graham, as he sat with the letters before him, made all manner of excuses for her; and this he did the more eagerly, because he felt that he would have willingly made this affair a cause for breaking off his engagement, if his conscience had not told him that it would be unhandsome in him to do so.

When Augustus came he could not show the letters to him. Had he done so it would have been as much as to declare that now the coast was clear as far as he was concerned. He could not now discuss with his friend the question of Mary Snow, without also discussing the other question of Madeline Staveley. So he swept the letters away, and talked almost entirely about the Orley Farm case.

'I only wish I were thought good enough for the chance,' said Augustus. 'By heavens! I would work for that woman as I never could work again for any fee that could be offered me.'

'So would I; but I don't like my fellow-labourers.'

'I should not mind that.'

'I suppose,' said Graham, 'there can be no possible doubt as to her absolute innocence?'

'None whatever. My father has no doubt. Furnival has no doubt. Sir Peregrine has no doubt,—who, by-the-by, is going to marry her.'

'Nonsense!'

'Oh, but he is though. He has taken up her case *con amore* with a vengeance.'

'I should be sorry for that. It makes me think him a fool, and her—a very clever woman.'

And so that matter was discussed, but not a word was said between them about Mary Snow, or as to that former conversation respecting Madeline Staveley. Each felt then there was a reserve between them; but each felt also that there was no way of avoiding this. 'The governor seems determined that you sha'n't stir yet awhile,' Augustus said as he was preparing to take his leave.

'I shall be off in a day or two at the furthest all the same,' said Graham.

'And you are to drink tea down stairs to-night. I'll come and fetch you as soon as we're out of the dining-room. I can assure you that your first appearance after your accident has been duly announced to the public, and that you are anxiously expected.' And then Staveley left him.

So he was to meet Madeline that evening. His first feeling at the thought was one of joy, but he soon brought himself almost to wish that he could leave Noningsby without any such meeting. There would have been nothing in it,—nothing that need have called for observation or remark,—had he not told his secret to Augustus. But his secret had been told to one, and might be known to others

in the house. Indeed he felt sure that it was suspected by Lady Staveley. It could not, as he said to himself, have been suspected by the judge, or the judge would not have treated him in so friendly a manner, or have insisted so urgently on his coming down among them.

And then, how should he carry himself in her presence? If he were to say nothing to her, his saying nothing would be remarked; and yet he felt that all his powers of self-control would not enable him to speak to her in the same manner that he would speak to her sister. He had to ask himself, moreover, what line of conduct he did intend to follow. If he was still resolved to marry Mary Snow, would it not be better that he should take this bull by the horns and upset it at once? In such case, Madeline Staveley must be no more to him than her sister. But then he had two intentions. In accordance with one he would make Mary Snow his wife; and in following the other he would marry Miss Staveley. It must be admitted that the two brides which he proposed to himself were very different. The one that he had moulded for his own purposes was not, as he admitted, quite equal to her of whom nature, education, and birth had had the handling.

Again he dined alone; but on this occasion Mrs. Baker was able to elicit from him no enthusiasm as to his dinner. And yet she had done her best, and placed before him a sweetbread and dish of sea-kale that ought to have made him enthusiastic. 'I had to fight with the gardener for that like anything,' she said, singing her own praises when he declined to sing them.

'Dear me! They'll think that I am a dreadful person to have in the house.'

'Not a bit. Only they sha'n't think as how I'm going to be said 'no' to in that way when I've set my mind on a thing. I know what's going and I know what's proper. Why, laws, Mr. Graham, there's heaps of things there and yet there's no getting of 'em;—unless there's a party or the like of that. What's the use of a garden I say,—or of a gardener neither, if you don't have garden stuff? It's not to look at. Do finish it now;—after all the trouble I had, standing over him in the cold while he cut it.'

'Oh dear, oh dear, Mrs. Baker, why did you do that?'

'He thought to perish me, making believe it took him so long to get at it; but I'm not so easy perished; I can tell him that! I'd have stood there till now but what I had it. Miss Madeline see'd me as I was coming in, and asked me what I'd been doing.'

'I hope you didn't tell her that I couldn't live without sea-kale?'

'I told her that I meant to give you your dinner comfortable as long as you had it up here; and she said —; but laws, Mr. Graham, you don't care what a young lady says to an old woman like me. You'll see her yourself this evening, and then you can tell her

whether or no the sea-kale was worth the eating! It's not so badly biled; I will say that for Hannah Cook, though she is rampagious sometimes.' He longed to ask her what words Madeline had used, even in speaking on such a subject as this; but he did not dare to do so. Mrs. Baker was very fond of talking about Miss Madeline, but Graham was by no means assured that he should find an ally in Mrs. Baker if he told her all the truth.

At last the hour arrived, and Augustus came to convoy him down to the drawing-room. It was now many days since he had been out of that room, and the very fact of moving was an excitement to him. He hardly knew how he might feel in walking down stairs, and could not quite separate the nervousness arising from his shattered bones from that other nervousness which came from his—shattered heart. The word is undoubtedly a little too strong, but as it is there, there let it stay. When he reached the drawing-room, he almost felt that he had better decline to enter it. The door however was opened, and he was in the room before he could make up his mind to any such step, and he found himself being walked across the floor to some especial seat, while a dozen kindly anxious faces were crowding round him.

'Here's an arm-chair, Mr. Graham, kept expressly for you, near the fire,' said Lady Staveley. 'And I am extremely glad to see you well enough to fill it.'

'Welcome out of your room, sir,' said the judge. 'I compliment you, and Pottinger also, upon your quick recovery; but allow me to tell you that you don't yet look like a man fit to rough it alone in London.'

'I feel very well, sir,' said Graham.

And then Mrs. Arbuthnot greeted him, and Miss Furnival, and four or five others who were of the party, and he was introduced to one or two whom he had not seen before. Marian too came up to him,—very gently, as though he were as brittle as glass, having been warned by her mother. 'Oh, Mr. Felix,' she said, 'I was so unhappy when your bones were broken. I do hope they won't break again.'

And then he perceived that Madeline was in the room and was coming up to him. She had in truth not been there when he first entered, having thought it better, as a matter of strategy, to follow upon his footsteps. He was getting up to meet her, when Lady Staveley spoke to him.

'Don't move, Mr. Graham. Invalids, you know, are chartered.'

I am very glad to see you once more downstairs,' said Madeline, as she frankly gave him her hand,—not merely touching his—'very, very glad. But I do hope you will get stronger before you venture to leave Noningsby. You have frightened us all very much by your terrible accident.'

All this she said in her peculiarly sweet silver voice, not speaking as though she were dismayed and beside herself, or in a hurry to get through a lesson which she had taught herself. She had her secret to hide, and had schooled herself how to hide it. But in so schooling herself she had been compelled to acknowledge to herself that the secret did exist. She had told herself that she must meet him, and that in meeting him she must hide it. This she had done with absolute success. Such is the peculiar power of women; and her mother, who had listened not only to every word, but to every tone of her voice, gave her exceeding credit.

'There's more in her than I thought there was,' said Sophia Furnival to herself, who had also listened and watched.

'It has not gone very deep with her,' said the judge, who on this matter was not so good a judge as Miss Furnival.

'She cares about me just as Mrs. Baker does,' said Graham to himself, who was the worst judge of them all. He muttered something quite unintelligible in answer to the kindness of her words; and then Madoline, having gone through her task, retired to the further side of the round table, and went to work among the teacups.

And then the conversation became general, turning altogether on the affairs of Lady Mason. It was declared as a fact by Lady Staveley that there was to be a marriage between Sir Peregrine Orme and his guest, and all in the room expressed their sorrow. The women were especially indignant. 'I have no patience with her,' said Mrs. Arbuthnot. 'She must know that such a marriage at his time of life must be ridiculous, and injurious to the whole family.'

The women were very indignant,—all except Miss Furnival, who did not say much, but endeavoured to palliate the crimes of Lady Mason in that which she did say. 'I do not know that she is more to blame than any other lady who marries a gentleman thirty years older than herself.'

'I do then,' said Lady Staveley, who delighted in contradicting Miss Furnival. 'And so would you too, my dear, if you had known Sir Peregrine as long as I have. And if—if—if—but it does not matter. I am very sorry for Lady Mason,—very. I think she is a woman cruelly used by her own connections; but my sympathies with her would be warmer if she had refrained from using her power over an old gentleman like Sir Peregrine, in the way she has done.' In all which expression of sentiment the reader will know that poor dear Lady Staveley was wrong from the beginning to the end.

'For my part,' said the judge, 'I don't see what else she was to do. If Sir Peregrine asked her, how could she refuse?'

'My dear!' said Lady Staveley.

‘According to that, papa, every lady must marry any gentleman that asks her,’ said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

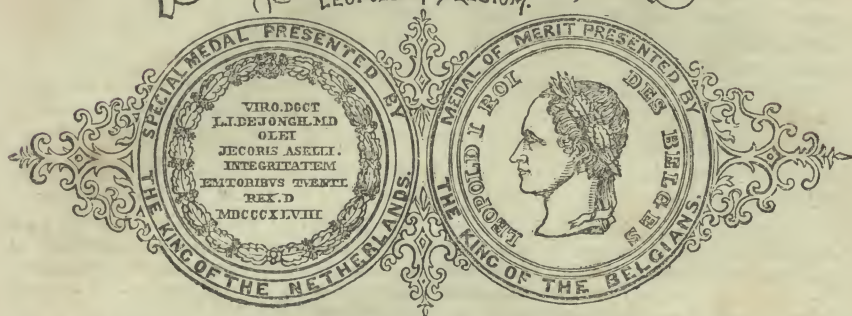
‘When a lady is under so deep a weight of obligation I don’t know how she is to refuse. My idea is that Sir Peregrine should not have asked her.’

‘And mine too,’ said Felix. ‘Unless indeed he did it under an impression that he could fight for her better as her husband than simply as a friend.’

‘And I feel sure that that is what he did think,’ said Madeline, from the further side of the table. And her voice sounded in Graham’s ears as the voice of Eve may have sounded to Adam. No; let him do what he might in the world;—whatever might be the form in which his future career should be fashioned, one thing was clearly impossible to him. He could not marry Mary Snow. Had he never learned to know what were the true charms of feminine grace and loveliness, it might have been possible for him to do so, and to have enjoyed afterwards a fair amount of contentment. But now even contentment would be impossible to him under such a lot as that. Not only would he be miserable, but the woman whom he married would be wretched also. It may be said that he made up his mind definitely, while sitting in that arm-chair, that he would not marry Mary Snow. Poor Mary Snow! Her fault in the matter had not been great.

When Graham was again in his room, and the servant who was obliged to undress him had left him, he sat over his fire, wrapped in his dressing-gown, bethinking himself what he would do. ‘I will tell the judge everything,’ he said at last. ‘Then, if he will let me into his house after that, I must fight my own battle.’ And so he betook himself to bed.

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[TURN OVER.]

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